

Cambridgeshire Rats Scrapbook 1897 to 1990

Facts, Features and (occasional) Fallacies
reported in Cambridge Newspapers

summarised by

Mike Petty

TABLE TALK.

In times of stress, such as siege or the direst poverty, civilized people have been known to eat the flesh of rats, but the stress has had to be very great. Horses, dogs, and cats have disappeared before the vermin, and the eater of other vermin have been turned into food. I have been informed that years ago it was a not uncommon thing for the poorer class of agricultural labourer to eat rats, but for that I cannot vouch. However that may be, I am able to give one genuine example of rat-eating in this district. Appropriately enough, the example comes from West Wrating. Last week certain West Wrating people went a-ratting, and others had a rat supper. And they are nothing the worse for their explorations into a gastronomic unknown. They are not, however, anxious for another supper of the kind.

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Does anyone else wish to try a rat supper?

CDN 3rd February 1906

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Most of these stories originally appeared in the Cambridge Daily/Evening/News or the
Cambridgeshire Weekly News, its sister title.

They are supplemented by some articles published in the
Cambridge Independent Press or Cambridge Chronicle

Most were featured in my ‘Looking Back’ column in the Cambridge News from 1996-2014

The complete ‘Cambridgeshire Scrapbook’ of which this is a small section is published online at
bit.ly/CambsCollection
<https://archive.org/search.php?query=creator%3A%22Mike%20Petty%22>

I have digital and other copies of most of the stories summarised.
Many may be read on Flickr in Albums headed ‘*Cambs News*’
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/153171359@N04/albums>

The original volumes are housed in the Cambridgeshire Collection at Cambridge Central Library
where there are many other indexes dating back to 1770.

They also have detailed newspaper cuttings files on over 750 topics that have been compiled since the
1960s.

Newspapers sometimes get things wrong. I copy things out incorrectly. Do check

There are a multitude of spelling and layout errors. Please forgive or correct them

News never stops but this file was finished on 31 August 2016.

I will maintain supplements and corrections – contact me for anything you need

Please make what use of these notes that you may. Kindly remember where they came from

See my website – www.mikepetty.org.uk for further notes.

Mike Petty, Stretham

2018

1897 03 10

Gamlingay: Very wet weather has been experienced in this district for some time past and fine weather is now very urgently required. The clay land has lacked the pulverising influence of frosts and the heavy rains have beaten the land down to such a tenacious mass that drilling will be very difficult and unsatisfactory. The mild winter has enabled the farmer and grazier to keep his stock on the grass. A short time ago a visitor at Gamlingay was changing trains at Ely when his attention was called by the stationmaster to the novel view of about 60 rats "up a tree" near the station. The heavy rains had flooded the district including a farmhouse and yard, and the rats to escape drowning had mounted the tree

1900

1903 06 13

A terrible discovery was made at a stack near Saffron Walden. A labourer came across the remains of a man with his leg protruding beyond the covering of the straw and P.C. Field of Newport was sent for. The body upon being uncovered presented a ghastly spectacle, all plump portions of the flesh having been devoured by rats, together with portions of the face and neck. There was no left arm, not any indication the deceased had had one. It is thought he had been there many weeks. He was attired in the remains of a fashionable cut tweed and wearing good boots with a hat of the Christy's make.

1904 03 18

Ratting is a form of amusement which dates back to the dim ages. Usually this practice is carried on in out of the way places but in Cambridge ratting parties are to be seen on Midsummer Common on Sundays. The undergraduate takes a great pride in the sporting qualities of his "dawg's" pedigree, half-bred or mongrel, and certain townies feed this pride by collecting a supply of rats for the alleged sporting dogs to worry. With stout wire cages slung on their backs the dealers await the arrival of undergraduates and then offer rats at a "bob apiece". Rat after rat is released from the cage, given half a dozen yards start, and then the dogs "course" it to its death. The slaughter over, the dead rats are piled on the common to fester and rot

1904 06 03

Fire in Messrs Bell and Son's premises in Wheeler Street, an ancient building used as a corn and seed merchants premises for two or three centuries. Police constable Winter noticed fire and smoke at 4.30 am and gave the alarm. The hose reel from the Guildhall was affixed to a hydrant and a stream of water directed on the burning building. Firemen appeared on the scene with the horsed fire-escape and tender but the building of three floors and constructed largely of lath and plaster was burning fiercely. The flames leapt high through the roof and shot out through the windows. In a very short time the roof fell in with a crash and all hope for saving the property was destroyed. The efforts of 28 firemen and 15 police were directed towards preventing the spread of the fire to the adjoining property. The cause of the outbreak is unknown. There had been unusual activity among the rats and mice in the old premises, now taken as a sign that the fire had got a good hold on Sunday evening. The damage was extensive. The fire and second floors, used for the storage of fodder and seed were nearly burnt out, the ground floor and offices were severely damaged by smoke. The basement and the top floor and a small part of the roof of the 'Bell' public house were damaged by water as were the contents of the tobacconist's shop at the end of Wheeler Street occupied by Mr Canham. The window frames of the Cambridge Free Library were slightly damaged by the heat. 04 06 03

1906 01 06

This week has died near Chatham an old man named Walter Tibball, said to have been a prosperous pork butcher of Cambridge. But nobody here remembers him. He had at one time been prosperous but was crossed in love and lived in as a hermit in a dirty hut in a meadow swarming with rats. There was a similar case at Cottenham six years ago; he too had an ill-fated love affair followed by fondness for spirituous liquors and lived in a squalid hut on his own bit of freehold. 06 01 06f

1906 02 03

Years ago it was not uncommon for the poorer classes of agricultural labourers to eat rats. Last week West Wratting went a-ratting, and seven young men had a rat supper. They were members of a village club who meet over a village shop. The flavour can be compared to that of 'sweetened soap'. Rat pie is the best method of serving up the dish though rat curry would reduce the flavour. There is a 'yellow streak' which must be removed or nobody would go near the pie when cooked and on no account should the rats be full-grown as they are too strong in taste and smell. 06 02 03b

1907 09 07

News reporters in the Cambridge 'haunted house' heard a 'thump-thump-thump' repeated twice. Had the spook obliged? Not a bit of it – the sound came from next door. Either the neighbour found a spot which required hammering or he thought he would reward the investigators with something to investigate. No noises have ever occurred after eleven o'clock so the pair packed up their paraphernalia and left without having heard anything more ghostly than the scratching of rats and mice. But outside the excitement remains as real as ever 07 09 07 & a

1910

1910 06 27

Following a complaint that water could not be got from the pump between the Red Lion and the allotments at Cheveley, Mr Graystone went to investigate. The source of supply was a field fifty yards away where he found an offensive-looking pond. The water was an inky colour and covered with green duckweed. It looked altogether horrible. There were lots of rats living in the pond. But the water was not meant for drinking; it was just for slopping purposes and there should be a notice to that effect. There had never been a case of typhoid arising from it. CWN 08 11 20 Massacre of Rats - During threshing operations at Samson's Barn, Boxworth, there was a great killing of rats, many of which were stated to have been as large as rabbits. Several pitch pole sticks were broken in butchering the gigantic rodents 10 05 27f

1010 12 02

Sawston Rat Extermination Association urged the District Council to take measures for the destruction of rats. The Medical Officer said their fleas caused plague and recommended certain poisons should be used. Dead rats should be buried two feet under the ground or, better still, cremated. The council would have to bear expenses if they employed people to exterminate them and they asked farmers and gamekeepers to co-operate in their destruction. 10 12 02l

1913 10 10

There was until recently in Wilburton a large increase in the number of rats on the premises of Major Hudson, dealer and farmer. They ate the food that was given to pigs and other animals so it was found imperative to destroy them. John Sadler, rat catcher of Stretham was engaged with dogs and ferrets. The number killed was 104 13 10 10 p11

1913 12 05

CIPA report on payment for rats destroyed showed about 6,000 rats had been killed in Stretham, Haddenham, and Little Downham, but nearly ten-times that number in Littleport – as usual. It was unfair that other parishes should have to pay for Littleport rats. But they were the only parish to do its duty thoroughly. Mr G. Darby said the rats came to his mill and did a lot of damage. But Mr A. Darby said ratepayers were paying for the tails more than once. His brother who kept a mill at Pymore would not pay a penny for rat killing as long as the Council did it for him 13 12 05

1914 10 02

There was a great need of a mortuary for the Littleport area together with a post-mortem room. At present bodies have to be placed in barns and outhouses where they are liable to be gnawed by rats and bitten by fleas and other insects. A proper hygienic place should be provided for the reception of bodies upon which it is necessary to hold inquests, Ely RDC was told. 14 10 02

1918 02 13 CIP

Rats and Sparrows. Fierce rages the war on rats and sparrows in the locality (Histon and Impington). Statistics show that for the months of December and January some 251 sparrows and 308 rats' tails were handed to the collector under the scheme as arranged by the Histon and Impington Parish Councils. The rates recently published are still in vogue. 18 02 13

1918 10 30a

Bassingbourn stacks, overrun by rats - court case p5

1919 08 11

Rats! A well-known Linton resident had an unfortunate weekend with big poultry and stock. On Thursday he discovered that eight ducklings had been taken by rats, and eight others, together with the hen foster-mother, lay dead in the nest. On Thursday two of his rabbits were missing. But disaster did not end there, as the family goat got into the kitchen garden, demolishing a whole bed of asparagus, several rows of peas and other edibles. 19 08 11 CIP

1919 08 20

Hunter. A Histon cat has developed into a mighty hunter. It finds nothing too difficult to tackle. During a recent week it brought home the following to its master, Mr. J. M. Taylor, three wild rabbits, four full-sized rats, two stoats, 20 mice, eight sparrows, one mole, one thrush. The rabbits were brought home alive, but the others, including even the stoats, had been killed. The cat has never been trained, but if it had what a wonderful retriever it might have proved 19 08 20

1920 01 07

Rats Killed, Up to December 3rd last the number of rats killed in the county and paid for by Cambs County Council under the Rats Order, was 35,516. The districts concerned were: Little Abington (number of rats killed 504), Ashley (980), Balsham (2,718), Borough Green (358), Bottisham (999), Cheveley (631), Chippenham (838), Great Chishill (322), Croxton (225), Dullingham (1,205), Duxford (754), Elsworth (39), Fordham (8,072), Fowlmere (489), Harston (322), Hauxton (186), Heydon (1,593), Hildersham (236), Horseheath (324), Ickleton (1,095), Isleham (3,809), Kennett (1,422), Kirtling (396), Kneesworth (549), Linton (584), Lode (548), Melbourn (442), Newton (160), Pampisford (429), Sawston (332), Shepreth (313), Shudy Camps (1.38), Snailwell (786), Soham (2,896), Stetchworth (1,105), Swaffham Prior (1,032), Thriplow (464), Waterbeach (967), West Wickham (995), Whittlesford (324), Great Wilbraham (846), Wood Ditton (2,017).

1922 08 23

Shall the Ely Urban Council obtain powers to kill rats or not? That was the crux of a resolution proposed at the meeting on Monday. The Rev T.J. Kirkland raised the position regarding the Mill Pits and the nuisance caused by the shooting of objectionable rubbish there and the consequent presence of rats. The danger of the evil was not generally realised. For instance, a rat chart of England showed that in the worst areas cancer was more prevalent than in others; also rats damaged crops and properties and were also a great danger to health as disease carriers. The chairman said it was not enough for one local authority to take it up and the other to leave it alone, while the Isle Committee did their utmost, West Suffolk did nothing and all the Isle rats bolted into Suffolk for the time being. (Laughter).

1925 08 12

Ely wants a pied piper. For weeks past allotment holders in Barton Fields have been missing produce such as peas & broad beans and have attributed the blame to two-legged thieves. But much 'stolen' produce was found stored between a rhubarb bed & a rubbish heap, where a big rat was acting as sentry. In the evening an army of rats of all sizes was seen to emerge from an adjacent ditch & begin to remove their plunder to a spare 'storehouse'. One horticulturist says they leave tracks which are so distinct one would think that sheep had been making their way over the plots.

1926 03 27

At the County Agricultural Committee Mr Amos said a tremendous amount of damage was done by rats and at the University Farm they had recently killed between 1,000 and 1,500 of them. Mr Taylor said a rat jumped on one of his students and scratched his face. They had killed 5,000 rats since harvest, they are all over the fields. Mr Pearson: "I think everybody who had land should be paid 1d or 2d per rat. Nobody has got the time to catch rats unless they are paid for it."

1926 11 20

The County Agricultural Organiser gave an interesting lecture on the destruction of rats at Lt Shelford village hall. People did not pay enough attention to the rat menace. There were far too many rats about Cambridge for his liking and if they held a Little Shelford Rat Week it would do a world of good. Everybody should kill rats whenever they got the chance. If each person killed one a week it would be doing some good.

1927 01 08

Mr A.E. Stubbs said that housing conditions in some part of rural Cambridgeshire were worse than in any other parts of England and were a national scandal. Race-horses were better housed than some agricultural labourers. He knew cottages that one would not put a pig in where there were six, seven or eight people in two rooms; where a curtain had to be drawn across a bedroom for a mixed family of boys and girls, and where a woman had to put the food in an old tin trunk at night or there would be no food in the morning owing to the depredations of the denizens of the forests – rats ran over the beds and ate the food.

1927 02 08

The Great Chesterford Rat and Sparrow Club dinner was told that 2,845 sparrows had been killed, against 7,135 in 1925 and 6,527 rats against 8,600. The society was doing good work in keeping down the vile rat. The sparrow was also a pest but it did good when in search of caterpillars. They hoped the other side of Saffron Walden would form a club as it was hardly fair that one district should take steps to keep down the number of rats and sparrows and others do nothing at all.

1927 11 26

Littleport rats, p7*

1928 03 01

The object of the Great Chesterford Sparrow and Rat Club is that all members shall kill one fully-fledged sparrow for each acre, with one rat for every two acres of his occupation during the year, and that 29 sparrows or 10 rats be the minimum contribution. Any member not killing the requisite numbers will be fined a half-penny an acre; the money going towards the cost of the annual dinner. During the year 5,989 rats and 3,126 sparrows had been killed.

1928 10 31

A disastrous fire resulted in the almost total demolition of the famous old water mill at Grantchester. The flames spread with such rapidity that within 30 minutes the position seemed helpless. The interior was just like a flaming cauldron, presenting a fiery beacon for miles around. The fire originated in the engine room where there was an oil engine, chemical extinguishers were tried without result. The men were beaten back by the smoke and flames; several were unable to save their coats and three bicycles had to be left to the flames. The only lives known to be lost were those of a cat and her kittens but it is thought some rats were also trapped, judging by the squeaks that were heard during the progress of the fire.

1931 12 25

The discovery of the body of an unknown man in a ditch at Benwick has provided that rural locality with a first-class sensation. It was in a very advanced state of decomposition, reposed in an ordinary sleeping position, and all the unclothed or exposed parts had been completely eaten away by rats. It was not unusual to see tramps sleeping in that way, in fact there were scores of them. 31 07 17d

St Ives tramps complained that their food and clothing had been gnawed by rats in the workhouse. But the Master said if they carried food in their clothing it was obvious that the rats would go for it at night. It was their fault as they left their clothes on the floor instead of hanging them up. He had shot 30 rats during the last month and there had been no trouble during the past three days. 31 12 25d

1932 02 18

Ely Allotment Association complained of damage caused by 2,500 rats on Bridge Fen that had dug peas out of the ground. They made a special effort with 20 men, ferrets, dogs and guns but only managed to kill 50 of them. The rats were attracted by clumps of sugar beet tops being left but the council refuse dumps were worse than the allotments. At Prickwillow rats came from two to three miles to get to pigs, and they did not know what to do. 32 02 18 & 18a

1932 10 07

Linton council heard that there was a plague of rats. They should go back to the old scheme of paying a penny per tail for dead rats. But there would be an awful scrap for the tails when stacks were pulled down and they would be paying out for all the rats in Cambridgeshire. It had cost a lot of money and in the end there were more rats than ever - there were rumours that people bred them, simply to kill them and collect the pennies. It would be cheaper to employ a professional rat-catcher. 32 10 07c

1933 04 03

The county was swarming with rats but nothing was being done. The Ministry would provide thousands of pounds for the destruction of musk-rats, but not for ordinary ones. The only way to deal with them was to kill the females and let the males go: Cambridgeshire should set the example for the rest of the country and appoint a rats officer. 33 04 03b

1933 05 10

Cambridge was one of the worst places for rats, councillors were told. The Pumping Station and the boundary ditches at Cherry Hinton were simply teeming with them. They could get rid of them in a very short time if they adopted the old plan of paying so much for each rat destroyed. In Hertfordshire there were two rats officers, and the Isle of Ely had taken other steps. But Cambridgeshire had done nothing. 33 05 10

1936 07 30

Harston flooding, Prickwillow and Sutton Gault bridges, musk rats, Quy Rye Ditch – 36 07 30e

1938 02 18

Rickling and Quendon Rat and Sparrow Club is over 30 years old & one of only two in the country. The rules say that each member must kill thirty sparrows (four eggs are accepted as one bird) and 10 rats during the year. There is a halfpenny fine for each pest short of these numbers. Last year the club accounted for 1,709 sparrows & 2,681 rats – one member alone killed over a thousand 38 02 18

1940

1948 01 29

The Great Ouse Catchment Board has put a price of £5 on the head of the coypu rat, as if it increased in numbers it could become a serious menace to the safety of the fens. It burrows into banks to make a nest, digging a long tunnel larger than a rabbit hole. "If floods came such holes as that might easily cause a bank to blow" said Mr W.E. Doran. The coypu rat is a South American species and is bred in this country for its fur. Several of the rats escaped from a farm in Norfolk. Two have so far been shot in the Catchment Board's area. One weighed 16½lbs and was the size of a terrier dog

1948 07 26

Conington school rats, p7

1948 09 21

Several million people in Great Britain ate their Sunday dinner to a radio broadcast of Cambridge accents and comments from the clubroom of Histon's Barley Mow. Jake Smith told the "Country Magazine" programme some stories of his pumping station during the 1947 floods - how it was swamped out and subsequently pumped non-stop for 336 hours. "Everything went through the pumps", he said, "including a tremendous lot of fish". Fred Toates told of his job of getting rid of rats and rabbits, with wasps and hornets as a summer-time addition. "Funny thing how the hornets get into all the "posh" houses - Doctor's and parsons and such places. Mrs Young Nightingale said "I've always done gleaning ever since I can remember. It's a job you've got to like doing, because it's very tiring. If you don't keep your back down you won't get much

1949 05 12

Speaking in parliament Mr A.E. Stubbs referred to an estate of around 3,000 acres outside Newmarket which was occupied during the war for military purposes. When the war was over it was occupied by prisoners, by Poles and others, but when the occupants had gone the military authorities took no trouble to see the camp was cleaned up. Rats spread all over the adjacent land. There were six stacks of wheat and barley which were destroyed. There were at least 600 rats in each stack

1960s The Cambridgeshire Collection has newspaper cuttings from this date

1960

1960 08 31

People living in cottages shortly to be demolished in Prospect Row and Brandon Place described conditions. One housewife told of hearing rats at the back door, "I found the hole and covered it with coal". Another spoke of having two rats in the house which is so damp she has to redecorate once a year. "My eldest boy, who is four, catches cold after cold and I shall be glad when we move. I don't care where it is as long as it has three bedrooms and a bathroom", she says. A Ministry inspector said the properties were unfit for human habitation. But an 81-year-old lady who has lived in her house for 11 years said: "I can't understand why they want to knock them down". 60 08 31a

1960 11 17

Land in Stanley Road was a breeding ground for rats and filthy rubbish had been dumped there, an inquiry was told. Cambridge Caravans moved part of its operations from Ditton Road to Newmarket Road in 1956 and now wanted to store up to 40 caravans on the site behind a wattle fence six feet high. The land was an old claypit found to be unsuitable for building. Some of the houses around it had settled and cracked and were practically unsafe to live in. An adjoining electricity sub-station made a humming noise which rendered the site unsuitable for residential purposes. But planners said five similar applications had been refused and it was reserved for residential development. 60 11 17

1962 12 17

Rubbish from the corporation tip in Coldham's Lane was spread over a wide area by the gales on Saturday; gardeners were littered with paper and other refuse. But residents claim this is nothing new: "We get smells in our houses, fillies and rats frequently visit us and the floors are covered with dust each morning; and these nuisances all come from the rubbish pit", one claims. 62 12 17b

1964 03 20

Colin Drage of Abbots Ripton has been a rat catcher since leaving school. He cycles up to 30 miles a day carrying bait and traps. He formerly kept five dogs and 60 ferrets but now mainly relies on modern poisons. His biggest catch was at the old Huntingdon incinerator where he picked up over 800 dead rats, many others died in their holes. But now many old buildings in Huntingdon and St Ives have been demolished so there are not so many rats about. 64 03 20f

1964 09 07

Milton people petitioned for a weekly refuse collection saying their dustbins are seething with maggots and breeding house flies and rats. The present fortnightly collections are inadequate. Some

residents of the flats have no open fireplace or incinerator and since the lawns have been sown, no open ground to burn kitchen waste. Young children were tempted to explore overflowing garbage and gastric illnesses had caused high absence from the school. 64 09 07b

1966 07 29

Rubbish, rats, flies – grim view of city in 1966; people still living in houses which have not been modernised – 66 07 29

1970

1974 02 26

Mr John Impey told Melbourn parish council: “There are an awful lot of rats at Melbourn. One old gentleman watches rats run through his home and others watch them play in their gardens”.

1980

1983 11 05

Littleport rats, p6

1988 12 29

A plague of rats is sweeping the region with the number of reported sighting in Cambridge nearly doubling since September. 88 12 29

1989 01 03

The current scourge of rats which is reaching epidemic proportions in Cambridgeshire spells good business for Town and County Pest Services, based in Carlton. They first produced their secret poison recipe in plastic sachet form in 1964 and are working full-time to meet a growing demand for their Townex product from all over the country. Each sachet is printed with the antidote in case a pet accidentally eats some 89 01 03

1989 07 08

Masked council workers have been sent to fumigate a Cambridge house and clear out the debris left by squatters. Graffiti had been daubed on the walls, rotting food and mouldy bread litters the floors and rubbish was strewn everywhere. There was a risk of rats and fleas taking over the empty council house in Mill Road. Neighbours are relieved the squatters have moved out: they had been playing music and drums in the garden all night, and throwing bottles out of the window. 89 07 08